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The Cloverleaf

THE SIGN
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The Cloverleaf

A BOOKLET ISSUED NOW AND THEN BY
THE MCFARLAND PUBLICITY SERVICE
WITH HEADQUARTERS IN HARRISBURG, PA.

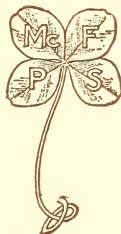
Pertinent Points on Nursery Advertising

An Address by JOHN WATSON

Princeton, New Jersey (Ex-President of the American Association of Nurserymen), at the Convention of the Southern Nurserymen's Association in Chattanooga, September 7, 1921

LET me say right off that my idea in coming here is not to tell you something. I don't know enough about advertising, nor about the nursery business either, to pose as a teacher; rather I am here to consider a subject that we are all interested in, to point out some things done, to ask questions and to suggest some methods that are followed by other advertisers. Maybe we can find some new ways and possibly better ways to present our products to the public.

Now, what *is* advertising? And what is its *Purpose*? It is to sell something, isn't it? So I would say that advertising is whatever you do and say that establishes a friendly relationship that results in sales. That relationship has to be based on confidence and good-will. Its aim



must be permanency. If I advertise my second-hand car for sale I want an immediate buyer, and after delivery the matter ends. But nurserymen advertise for another purpose; you want orders now; but your business does not end this year nor next year. When you sell a bill of goods to a planter, your business with that man has just begun; your buyers must be made into permanent customers.

ADVERTISING MUST ESTABLISH CONFIDENCE

A relationship of confidence and good-will is of the utmost importance to you. The buying of nothing else requires the same degree of confidence that the planter must put in the nurseryman. Nursery advertising must be built on that idea. It must be frank, straightforward, absolutely truthful. It must never overstate the facts. Under-statement is an actual advantage: it inspires confidence; and performance must match every promise.

Since advertising copy and catalogues are closely bound together, and must supplement each other to be effective, I want to consider them together.

Trees and plants and flowers offer the most attractive possibilities for interesting description and beautiful illustration. Nursery stock is one of the easiest things to advertise and yet for the individual nurseryman it offers the paradox of being at the same time one of the most difficult. It is easy to be general; it is difficult to be specific.

Take the advertising of automobiles, for example. Automobile manufacturers don't advertise just "automobiles." They don't buy space nor print books to tell you how much fun it is to ride. The Studebaker Company advertises the Studebaker car. The Chandler advertises its "marvelous motor." The Hupmobile "gets there" and "you pay less for gas and oil and repairs." Dodge Brothers pointedly inquire "After the purchase price, what follows?" The point I want to make is that every man who buys a car *knows exactly why* he buys that particular car. The advertisement *tells the reason*.



If I am in need of a hat, I notice that the merchants who solicit my trade do not offer me just a hat—any old hat. I can buy a Knox, or a Stetson, or a Young hat, and the seller of each gives me very *good reasons why* I should buy his hat. There is not the same opportunity for differentiating values in our line but there *are* opportunities.

MERE ANNOUNCEMENTS NOT ADVERTISING

When I read nursery advertisements I find that most nurserymen buy space to announce that they are nurserymen; that they grow trees. There is neither news nor novelty in the statement. It is not advertising. Nobody is going to make the mistake of supposing that a nurseryman is a purveyor of books, or hats, or ice-cream freezers. I consult a dozen nursery catalogues and I find them a dozen books about trees and plants; often very handsome books, differing in covers but not in contents; varying in minor details but not in essentials.

I find that both Jones and Brown distribute books containing very much the same list of varieties, described in about the same language, and illustrated with the same pictures. They are good handbooks. But as a possible buyer from one of them, which man am I going to place my order with? How am I to know whether to buy of Jones or of Brown? The very thing that I am interested in as a buyer is the thing that is conspicuously absent in nearly every nursery catalogue. It is the “reason why.” And it isn’t there. Yet the thing for the advertiser to keep in mind constantly is that some intelligent reason must be given the buyer for placing his order with the advertiser.

GETTING THE BUYER’S VIEWPOINT

With us, the absence of that “reason why” can be accounted for in two ways. One is the fact that nursery-



men, like a good many advertisers, write their advertising copy and their catalogue to themselves. We must address ourselves to the people we want to buy our goods. You go about it apparently believing that the important thing is to sell. But the important thing to you is that people *should buy your trees*. Forget about selling; think about the buying end. And that means you've got to get away from constant thought of your business and become intensely interested in the buyer's business.

It is his order you want, isn't it? Go after it from his standpoint. Tell him the *reason why* he should buy your particular trees. If you are Brown, tell the planter why Brown's trees are the ones to buy. That is the great difficulty in advertising nursery stock. Everything else is easy, but the most important thing about it is the most difficult thing. If you think it can't be done, just take a week off and travel with one of your plate-book agents. He can give you selling points about your business that you never knew before.

FINDING NEW SELLING POINTS

Most advertisers of nursery stock recognize that difficulty and try to overcome it in various ways. The fact of age in a business is worth advertising, because age is some assurance of quality or service, for without them the business might not have survived. But some of the best nurseries are new nurseries.

The fact of size also warrants the assumption of a certain value in products without which the business might not have grown big—yet some of the very small nurseries grow excellent stock and they answer your argument with theirs: the advantage of small acreage and personal attention to every detail.

Some advertisers fall back on novelties, and it is of great value to be able to offer something worth while that others cannot supply; yet the public has noticed that not 10 per cent of the novelties introduced with a great



flourish of trumpets ever measure up to the old tested varieties. And so the public has become doubtful about that sort of advertising.

CHEAP PRICES DEFEAT THEMSELVES

Then there is the too common appeal of cheap prices, an argument that defeats itself at once—or should—because prices lower than the average among good firms invite the conclusion that they mean one of two things: either that the trees are not worth more than a cheap price, or else that the nurseryman admits his incapacity as a salesman. And admitted incapacity in one matter arouses suspicion of incapacity in other matters connected with the business. Whenever a merchant tells me that his goods won't bring as much as another merchant's, I'm not going to risk buying his goods at any price. I can say out of experience, and I think all of you can, too, that buyers are not attracted by cheap trees although they may be attracted by cheap prices. All of you have received letters telling you that your prices are higher than somebody else's, but that if you will meet so-and-so's prices the order will be placed with you. He wants your trees at the cheap man's price. The bargain price makes buyers suspicious of the goods.

PUTTING THE "REASON WHY" TO WORK

It is necessary for every nurseryman to have some good reason why buyers should give him their orders. That reason may be found in different things: the care with which varieties are propagated, the thoroughness of their cultivation, suitable land, equipment for proper handling at packing-time, shipping facilities, the service that follows delivery. All these are things that the buyer is interested in. Of overshadowing importance to the buyer is the matter of getting fruit trees true to name.

Now, it is my honest opinion that the great bulk of the



trees sold *have* been true to name. We hear a great deal about those that have not, but we hear very little about the profitable orchards that have turned out to be exactly what was ordered. That is because the one is interesting news and the other isn't.

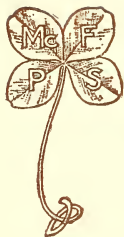
If Jenkins gets drunk and beats his wife, all the neighbors talk about it because it is a thing unusual in the community. But if Simkins pays his bills and goes to church and behaves himself according to ordinary standards, it doesn't excite the community at all. The usual and the expected excite no comment; it is the unexpected and the unusual that set tongues to wagging and move the community to excited comment. And yet that comment, quite as much as any basis it may have in fact, makes it imperative that nurserymen use every precaution and always greater precaution to have their fruit trees true to name. Continued confidence, permanent trade and profitable business depend on that. To give reasonable assurance of true-to-name stock is the most interesting thing a nurseryman can say to buyers and the most important element in his own success.

MAKING SALES OR TAKING ORDERS

When should nurserymen advertise? Or, to put it differently, when do folks buy trees and plants? That question has to be answered by every advertiser with respect to his goods. I think that you and I can answer as to nursery stock out of our own experience in buying other things.

Isn't it a fact that we very often make up our minds to buy certain articles long before we get them? I can name off-hand a dozen things that I have seen advertised that I am certainly going to get later on. I haven't come into possession of them yet. But they have been *sold* to me. That part of it has been done. And that is what we are considering.

Catalogue nurserymen advertise only in the fall and



spring. I never knew exactly why, so I asked a good many, and it interested me to find that I got the same answer in every instance: "It doesn't pay to advertise at other seasons. We get orders only in the spring and fall."

The last part of that statement we all know to be perfectly true. Fall and spring are the *planting*-seasons; folks send for nursery stock when they are ready to *plant* it. But we are not talking about *planting*; we are talking about *buying*. I feel very sure that folks buy trees and plants every day in the year; that is, they make up their minds to buy just as you and I do about the things we buy.

WHEN DOES THE BUYER ACTUALLY BUY?

When does a woman buy rose-bushes? Of course, she makes out her order and sends it off in the spring, because that is the time to plant roses. But we are not talking about delivering and planting; we want to know when she *buys* roses.

When does that woman make up her mind to buy roses and what varieties to buy? Isn't it in June, when roses are in bloom in her garden or in the neighbors' gardens? And why isn't that the very best time to advertise roses?—to have the garden's beautiful illustration of *what* to buy supplemented by the advertised suggestions of *where* to buy.

When does a man decide that it might be a mighty fine idea to have half a dozen peach trees in the back garden? Isn't it likely to be at about the time when Friend Wife is feeding him peaches and cream for breakfast or peach-cobbler for Sunday dinner?

ALL-THE-TIME-ADVERTISING MAKES SALES

Now, that idea of using and profiting by the illustration of our products in the orchard and in the garden can be carried out in every month and every week in the year. Peonies should be planted in the fall; but it looks to me



like a mighty good time to advertise them when peonies are in bloom in the spring.

Fruits can be profitably advertised in their fruiting season. Talk about fruit when folks are eating fruit. Last summer, I read a newspaper account of a man in Illinois who sold his crop of Yellow Transparent apples on a 40-acre lot for \$20,000.00. Now, why wasn't that fact a good thing for nurserymen with apple trees to sell to advertise right at that time?

Advertising is always most effective when it is tied up to a concrete fact. And there is no month of the year when nurserymen can't do that. In the dead of winter, when the evergreens stand like brides in their snowy veils, when the hedge of hemlock or of spruce gives cheer and protection to the place, when the slender birches stand like sentinels against the grey sky-line, when the barberries with their ripe, red berries add a touch of warmth and color to the snow-covered lawn—isn't *that* a good time to call attention to the enhanced beauty of the landscape and to suggest where those things can be bought? We must use the constant selling help of our own products.

I take it, then, that the best time, the obvious time, to advertise nursery stock of some kind is every day in the year. We tell ourselves that ours is a seasonal business; but it isn't. Our season for digging and shipping is short, but our *selling season* extends throughout the whole year.

CATALOGUES THAT MISS THE MARK

Advertising should be followed with catalogues of seasonable plants. The annual catalogue is too large. Its length is confusing. I was recently reading an article about big catalogues in *Printers' Ink*. It referred to big catalogues in general, but a specific instance was cited in our trade and therefore interesting. The writer said he wanted to plant a bed of tulips, so he answered an advertisement and received a large and handsome book offering trees and plants and bulbs of every description. He said



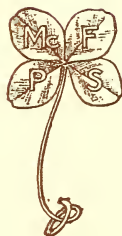
there were a dozen pages devoted to tulips in hundreds of varieties, all apparently very desirable, but out of so many offerings, he could not arrive at any decision and in the end bought none. But some time later he received a little 4-page folder offering bulbs in collections including a bed of tulips for \$10. He ordered two collections by return mail. He got an intelligent offer of what he wanted, telling him how far apart and how deep to plant, and all he wanted to know. It brought his order. Now, I think that we nurserymen might study the lesson in that.

SECTIONAL CATALOGUES SUGGESTED

A four-, eight-, or sixteen-page folder, offering only one or two articles, like roses, or peonies, or hedge plants, or shade trees, is far more effective and will bring more orders than a catalogue of 200 pages. The folder is inexpensive in printing and postage. Besides, the people who write you are not interested in everything you grow. They nearly always tell you what they want.

A woman who goes into a department store to buy a pair of silk stockings doesn't expect to be shown the stew-pans and wash-tubs and smoking-jackets before getting a chance to buy what she wants. I'd say: Split the catalogue into a number of units or folders offering one line; advertise each line at the blooming or fruiting season; and remind buyers with a dozen small catalogues instead of one big one. Some progressive and prosperous firms are doing that right now. The folder is specific; it answers the inquiry; it talks about one thing at a time; it is a bullet instead of bird-shot.

In describing varieties, let us get away from superlatives. They can't all be the best and yet if you read some catalogues you will think so unless you happen to know better. The best catalogue I ever read described peaches only by giving the month of ripening in that section, the color, and whether cling or free-stone, a line for each variety which was quite enough to cover the essentials.



MAKING SALES EVERY DAY

I have said that I believe in advertising every month in the year because something is illustrated every month in the garden or orchard, and that timeliness gives point and effect to the copy.

But a still better reason than that is because trees and plants can be sold every month, and, as a matter of fact, *are* sold every day. If that is not true, why is it that the nurserymen who employ agents keep their salesmen on the road throughout the year? They do that because they know from experience that trees can be sold and are sold every day.

The catalogue firms are making sales every day, but unlike the agency houses who get their orders in every week, the catalogue nurserymen get theirs in only at planting time. I think the catalogue men confuse the *receipt of the orders* with the *actual sale of the goods*.

ADVERTISING TO HELP SALESMEN

Nurserymen who sell through agents alone do not advertise. I have asked a great many, "Why?" And I have invariably gotten the same answer: "It doesn't pay us to advertise. It takes the man on the spot to get the signature on the dotted line."

Of course it does. But going back to our own experience in buying, how do we act?

I see something advertised and write for further information. Very soon I get a letter telling me what I want to know and maybe a catalogue followed by other printed matter. Then one day a traveling representative of the house comes along and if he is a good "closer" he books my order.

But let us keep this in mind: That nowadays the traveler is not so much the salesman as he is the closer. He gets the signature on the dotted line; he completes a sale already made. In many cases—in most cases, I venture to say—the actual sale has been made in advance of his



coming. It is so in nearly all selling. Life is too short, we are all too busy, we haven't the time nor has the traveling representative the time, for an educational interview. The house must prepare the way for the man on the road by first making his possible customers acquainted with the house and with the goods it sells. Advertising sells goods; travelers gather up the orders. The non-advertising nurseryman who depends on agents to get business is operating at an extraordinary and unnecessary expense. He figures generally that the retail selling price must be five times the wholesale or cost price. That is, to make a fair profit, it is necessary to charge an advance of 500 per cent over cost. Experience seems to show that to be necessary. But why *is* it necessary? Isn't it a fact that those who buy through agents are one-time buyers? I would say that 80 per cent are.

WHAT MAN KNOWS HIS NURSERYMAN?

Ask any farmer where he bought his trees and the chances are that nine times out of ten he will say "In Winchester" or "in Rochester" or "from Pennsylvania;" but it is rarely the case that he will remember the name of the firm. That is because the firm has not taken the trouble to remind him; he does not find its advertisement in his paper; he received no catalogues; he is a customer lost; an asset gone to waste.

The customers of the advertising nursery include a much larger percentage of regular buyers. They receive constant reminders in the way of letters and catalogues and on the printed page. Now, isn't it an unusual selling expense if 80 per cent of your customers are only one-time buyers? Each one of those orders must yield its own profit.

Many successful merchants say that most first orders cost them as much as they get from the sale. The advantage is in establishing a contact that can be followed up: First buyers made into permanent customers; the house,



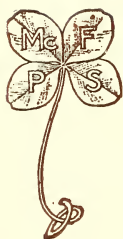
its name, its reputation, its goods, and its service must be kept constantly before the public and especially before its customers. Agency firms have the same opportunity, and their figures on selling expense would seem to indicate the same need for constant publicity to keep in touch with their trade. To lose 80 per cent of each year's buyers is a tremendous loss in potential profits; loss of contact established at great expense. Salesmen should have the support of the house they represent and the very best support they can have with the public is intelligent advertising in the territory they cover. If you don't believe it, ask your agents. I know the answer because I have been an agent myself.

LOOKING TO FUTURE SALES

All of us have noticed that during the last two years there has been very little nursery advertising. Space has been small or not used at all. Catalogues have been fewer and not so good in quality. There was a marked cutting down in advertising and printing investment. I have asked why? And it seems that the shortage of stock and the reaction following the war made it unnecessary to try to get business. Without effort the orders came for even more than could be supplied.

But some very successful merchants in other lines carried their usual advertising during the war years and when they could fill only a fraction of the orders they received. And right now they are doing business where others complain there are no orders. They figured that there is something besides immediate orders to work for, and that is the future orders; they advertised to keep in contact with the buying public and to conserve the good-will represented in their business.

In our line, feast and famine follow each other with great regularity. Beginning in the spring, we shall probably have more stock to sell than for some years back. We shall feel the necessity to make the selling effort that



has been unnecessary lately. The farmers, on whom we depend rather largely for buyers, are not in good shape and not likely to be in better shape for another year or so. Our market has to be worked; our field has to be intensively cultivated. The market is there; it will buy things; it is buying things; we must see to it that it *buys what we have to sell*. I mean we mustn't trust too much in Providence and F. W. Woolworth & Co.

NO SURPLUS IN SIGHT

This country is not likely to see any necessary surplus of good stock for years to come, if at all. We shouldn't think of surplus except as a spur to selling effort. We have a great, broad, undeveloped land with 20,000,000 homes and more needed. High rents and city costs are driving families into the suburbs and into the country. Our people are by inclination and because of ability, home-owners. That means tree-buyers. Ours is the richest country in the world; if it were not, we couldn't pay \$5,000,000,000 in Federal taxes in a peace year. We have over half the world's supply of gold in our vaults. Our bank deposits are the largest in our history. Every home-owner is a customer. A man can wear only one hat at a time, but every garden has a place for another plant. There are the great estates, the parks, the cemeteries, the highways, all needing the things we grow.

FACING AN OPEN MARKET

The market throughout the whole country is open to every nurseryman, no matter where located. Ours is not a local industry; few things are so widely distributed; Texas peaches are planted in Michigan; Maryland apples go to Missouri; Illinois evergreens thrive in Massachusetts parks.

Outside of a few nurserymen whose goods and distribution are limited by climatic extremes, this great market



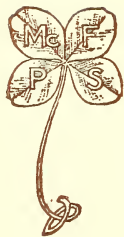
is open to all. The average nursery is limited in its possible expansion and growth by just two things and by nothing else: its capacity to produce and its ability to sell. A territory so vast can be covered only by printed matter, advertising copy and catalogues. Traveling salesmen can reach only a few. Each can well supplement the other; they go naturally together.

AN INDUSTRY THAT NEEDS ADVERTISING

An industry so absolutely the opposite of local can profit and does profit through advertising. No business that I know of needs advertising like the nursery business needs it; no business that I know of so readily responds to intelligent advertising. I don't mean to imply, now, that buying advertising space and distributing printed matter is going to make you or anybody else rich. There is a lot of money wasted for what some folks fondly imagine is advertising.

I have admitted that I think good nursery advertising copy is mighty hard to write. If I had any suggestions to offer they would be these: Have something to say. Say it in few words. Count 'em as you would the words in a cablegram; they cost a lot more. Let every statement be frank and to the point and absolutely truthful. Select a single line or a single idea and let it be featured in every advertisement. Vary the rest with the season. Talk about one thing at a time. Avoid humor as you would a pestilence; you may be as ponderously dull as you please and likely as not it will be accepted for wisdom; but avoid wit.

I would rather advertise in a big paper than a small one; its readers are apt to be better prospects. The prestige of the editorial page gives weight to what appears in the advertising pages. I'd rather have twelve inches in the biggest and best farm paper than one inch in a dozen papers. Large space is more effective than small space, but large or small, remember the effectiveness of the wide



margin. When you tell your story, stop. Use short words and few of them. Offer one thing, but suggest others. Make it much meat and little gravy.

You advise folks to go to a nurseryman for trees, don't you? We nurserymen are not experts at advertising. A good advertising agency can present our story better than we can. We must furnish the idea—the "reason why"—but the man used to doing that sort of thing can dress it up better than we can.

HARMONY IN ADVERTISING AND SELLING PLANS

The advertising copy, the catalogue and all other printed matter must be in perfect harmony. They should be written together. Those in an orchestra play the same tune.

Decide what sum you want to invest in a catalogue and then you or your advertising agency tell your printer that you want so many copies of a catalogue of so many pages and to give you the best he can for that amount. If the printer is a wise merchant he wants your future orders; he is a fool if he doesn't give you all he can for your money. If you buy like the planter who shops around for the cheapest trees, you may possibly have an experience like his.

FINALLY—THE PRACTICAL WAY

With our wide, rich country and its buying prospects open to every last one of us, with our people very largely the owners of their own homes and having a native wish to make those homes beautiful, with the greatest undeveloped market in the world ours to supply, we need not worry about surplus or prices if we will just go about getting the business intelligently and aggressively. It seems to me that the best way to do that—the best way for those who sell through agents as well as those who sell by means of catalogues—is with good, truthful, convincing adver-



tisements backed up by catalogues that must be real sales-messengers rather than handbooks on trees and plants. And in both there must always be emphasized that "reason why": the thing that gets customers and makes them friends and holds them. Confidence and good-will come first; the orders follow. Nor must we overlook the value of the continuity in advertising and its cumulative effect.

When Mr. Watson delivered this address he had no idea that it would be published in this form. However, it is too valuable to be lost, and we are indebted to Mr. Watson for permission to print.

—THE MCFARLAND PUBLICITY SERVICE.



ADVERTISERS in all lines can profit by the suggestions made by Mr. Watson, for the underlying principles can be applied to any business.

To the nurseryman we recommend a second reading of pages 14 to 16—and maybe a third reading.

The manufacturer and distributor of other products can substitute the name of his own products, and read the same pages with profit—and by acting can increase his profits.

And to both we present these three extracts:

“I believe in advertising every month in the year.

“A relationship of confidence and goodwill is of the utmost importance to you.

“A good advertising agency can present our story better than we can. We must furnish the idea—the REASON WHY—but the man used to doing that sort of thing can dress it up better than we can.”

THE McFARLAND PUBLICITY SERVICE

Advertising Agents

HARRISBURG

PENNSYLVANIA

